

RIVER WITCH

By ROARK BRADFORD

From Forum

RUBY was happy in the levee camp with Yaller Jack and away from old Granny Lou's everlasting talk about witches and devils and bad luck spirits. Yaller Jack wasn't studying witches and things. That big, stout scoundrel made a dollar four bits every day out on the levee. And when he came in from work at night he wasn't always saying, "Don't spit in de fire, gal, hit'll dry up yo' lungs," or "Don't pour dish water on de ground after sundown onless you wants to git a buck aguer." When Yaller Jack came in from work he was ready to eat.

Ruby knew it would dry up her lungs to spit in the fire and that pouring dish water on the ground would give her a "buck aguer." She knew that almost everything anyone naturally wanted to do brought some kind of bad luck. And Yaller Jack knew it, too. But he wasn't always devilling her about it. Not Yaller Jack.

That Yaller Jack!—Came up to Whitehall Plantation and saw Ruby just once and started courting her! And before she hardly knew it, he went all the way to Baton Rouge to buy a pair of courthouse licenses so he could marry her! With a preacher! Ruby knew lots of women who married their men without any courthouse licenses or preacher or anything. But Granny Lou liked the idea of preacher marrying for her.

"De preacher utters de words over hit," Granny Lou explained. "When de preacher say, 'Ashes to ashes, Lawd, and dust to dust, Lawd,' well, dat de sign for ev'y yuther man to keep away f'm you. Cause ef'n a man come monkeyin' around after dem words is said on a gal"—Granny Lou rolled her eyes ominously—"well, he better jest watch out."

Ruby did not remember hearing the preacher say those

words. All she remembered was that she stood up in a new calico dress by the side of that big, handsome man and dug her bare toes in the ground while the preacher prayed and preached and everybody sang. Then Yaller Jack took her to the levee camp seven miles down the river, toting her bundle of clothes for her and talking big talk about how he was saving his money to buy a farm and have a house with chickens and children running about so thick until you couldn't hardly walk!

"Hit won't be long, Baby," Yaller Jack said. "Another year, maybe, and I and you settles down in a house by ourse'fs—ceptin' for de chickens and chilluns and things."

Ruby rolled her big white eyeballs shyly and said, "Humph! Ain't you de beatin'est man!" And she giggled.

The Walking Boss had everything ready for them when they got to camp. The tent was up, the stove in place, and the mattress of hay-filled sacks upon the rustic bunk of pine saplings. The Walking Boss had sent a present, too—a piece of side meat, potatoes, cabbage, and beans from the camp commissary. He wanted women in camp. The more women there were, the less inclined were the men to run off.

There were several other women in camp. Big Bess boasted a "regular" preacher wedding just like Ruby's, and she "looked after" the young bride, telling her how to get supplies at the commissary and have them charged against her husband's wages, and when to start supper, so it would be ready when her man got in from work. Urline offered some advice, but Big Bess shut her up.

"A preacher might er married you to Yancey," Big Bess snorted, "but ain't nobody never seed no papers to prove hit."

The other women made no claims to preacher weddings. They had just married their men, and that was all there was to it. Old Smokey did not even claim that kind of marriage. The man that fed her best and treated her right was the man she cooked for until one or the other changed his mind. Just now she was Diamond Joe's woman, but Diamond Joe was gambling his money away and losing his credit at the commissary.

Ruby never had any trouble with Yaller Jack's credit at the commissary. Yaller Jack was thrifty.

"Don't go buyin' no fancy grub for us to eat, Baby," Yaller

Jack warned. "Just a few cabbages and side meat and things. Cause de mo' us don't buy, de mo' quicker us gits dat house wid de chickens and chilluns and things."

Ruby laughed at that. She liked to hear her man talk that way. He was so big and stout, and she was so little and young. But when he talked that way she felt as if she was big, and he was little, and she had to pet him. She was proud of being Yaller Jack's woman—his regular woman, with a spell on him by the preacher and a fancy paper from the courthouse to prove it. "Ashes to ashes, Lawd, and dust to dust, Lawd." That was something! She snuggled over against him in their bunk while Yaller Jack slept and snored.

Lots of nights Ruby would lie awake and listen to the mosquitoes sing, and the frogs hollo, and the owls hoot. Occasionally a panther would scream from the dense canebrake a mile back in the big woods. But Ruby was not afraid. She had lived close to the big woods all her life.

What scared Ruby was the nights when it was too hot for the mosquitoes and frogs and owls, and everything got so quiet—everything except Yaller Jack's snoring. On these hot nights she would lie awake and listen—listen to nothing—and hear sounds coming from the canebrake—something rolling, rolling, rolling, with a steady swingy rumble that make her kinky hair pull at her scalp and her flat nose swell out like a spreading adder's head and sniff the hot air.

"Hit's de river witch ole Granny Lou always used to be tawkin' about," she decided, and she threw her arms around the sleeping Yaller Jack so suddenly and clung so tightly that he woke up.

"What de matter wid you, gal?" Yaller Jack demanded.

"I's skeered," Ruby whined.

"Ain't nothin' to be skeered at," he said. "Git on yo' side de bunk and git to sleep. I's tired. I been workin'."

Ruby rolled over and went to sleep. But the next morning she felt all unstrung and foolish. She did not wrap her hair in the tight coils that morning, and she laughed at things that did not tickle her. But the most foolish thing she did was to let the commissary clerk sell her a string of red beads. Ruby knew better than to buy those beads. Of course she wanted them. Any woman would want a pretty string of beads like that. So she bought them and wore them about camp, laugh-

ing and singing, laughing at foolish things that did not tickle her, and singing "pop-outs"—little songs that just popped out of her mouth with no conscious effort on her part.

"Me and my man, us had a fallin' out.
Don't nobody know what hit was about—
And hit ain't nobody's business but my own."

"Gal, whyn't you git back to yo' tent and wrop yo' haid befo' de year wigs git in yo' years?" It was Big Bess reproving her. "And singin' dem devil pops! And bless Gawd, ef'n she ain't done bought a string er beads! Gal, what's gittin' into you? I bet Yaller Jack takes a stick to you when he gits back. Dem beads costes six bits—and dat's a ha'f a day's wages out yonder in de hot sun. Come yar struttin' around wid yo' haid bushin' and singin' devil-pops! You better be singin' 'Jay bird, jay bird, hang yo' haid.' 'At's what you better had."

Ruby knew she should have been ashamed. But she wasn't. She just laughed and walked around in a little circle, singing:

"I done done all I kin do,
And I can't git along wid you—
I'm gonter git me another papa,
Show's yow bawn!"

"Crazy gal!" Big Bess exploded. "Singin' yo' man out while he's out yonder workin' for you. I bet I'm gonter tell him on you, and I bet he's gonter whup you good."

"Whyn't you let dat chile alone?" Smokey came to her rescue. Old Smokey usually minded her own business and let the other women mind theirs. But she sympathized with the young woman. "She ain't on'y jest cuttin' up," she continued. "She don't mean nothin'. Hit gits so hot and lonesome around yar sometimes, I want to sing out ev'y man I ever seed."

"But she's married wid Yaller Jack," Big Bess protested.

"Dat don't make no diffunce who she married wid," came back Smokey. "I seed a heap er young gals and I ain't never seed one yit which don't cut up some. I don't keer how many mens dey is married wid."

"But hit ain't no way to treat no husband," Big Bess insisted. "De Bible say you hadn't oughter pay no mind to no yuther man as long as yo' husband is workin' for you."

"She ain't payin' no mind to no yuther man—hit ain't no yuther man in camp to pay mind to."

"Well, anyways," Big Bess argued lamely, "de Bible say de devil'll git her for singin' devil pops."

"De devil ain't gonter git her till she die," Smokey came back, "and she's about de livest thing about camp dis day and time."

Ruby liked Smokey for taking her part. Deep down in her heart she knew it was wrong to sing songs while Yaller Jack worked out in the hot sun. But some way or other she could not help singing them. She clung closely to Smokey the rest of the day, singing foolish songs and listening to Smokey talk.

"I knows all about hit, gal," Smokey told her. "Hit's de spike cane sproutin' and de river rollin', what you hyars. Hit's de young willows growin' and de owls a-hootin', what you hyars. Hit's de snakes a-crawlin' and de varmints muskin'. I hyars hit my ownse'f sometimes, and hit makes me want to git naked and run out in de thickets. Some say hit's de jay birds totin' sand to hell. But hit ain't. Hit's de ole river witch tryin' to come betwixt you and yo' man."

Ruby was awed by the recital. But her eyes flashed.

"Any 'ooman try to take my Yaller Jack," she said, "I'd chop dey heart out—witch or no witch."

Smokey groaned mysteriously. "Sometimes de witch is a 'ooman and steals de man," she explained. "But when hit's a young gal like you, most er de time hit's a he-witch which steals de gals."

Ruby was greatly relieved. "I got a charm on me," she said. "Can't no man steal me away f'm Yaller Jack. I got a charm."

"He-witches used to steal me," confessed Smokey sadly, "but hit ain't payin' me no mo' mind. Hit's de she-witches now, stealin' my mens. Hit just got done stealin' Diamond Joe f'm me."

"You and Diamond Joe quit?" Ruby asked.

"I loved him too good," Smokey replied. "When you loves 'em a heap, dat's when de witch pull is de stoutest."

Ruby quit singing pop-outs and went to her tent. By the time Yaller Jack returned from work she had her hair neatly wrapped in coils and was thoroughly contrite. As soon as supper was over, she brought out the string of beads that she had hidden and handed them to her husband.

"I buyed 'em for six bits," she explained. "I hadn't ougther." She waited for Yaller Jack to beat her.

"Dey sho' is purty," Yaller Jack said. "Put 'em on, Baby. I bets you look good in 'em."

Ruby shook her head. "Dey costes six bits," she repeated, "and dat's a ha'f a day's wages out yonder on de levee. You oughter take a stick to me for buyin' 'em."

Yaller Jack looked from Ruby to the beads and back again. Ruby would look good in those beads.

"Put 'em on, Baby," he urged, "and let Yaller see how good-lookin' you is in 'em."

"Nawp." Ruby was determined. "You take 'em and sell 'em to some er de mens for dey womens which ain't savin' money, Yaller. Den when us gits our house and chilluns and things, I buys me some mo' beads."

Yaller Jack sold the beads to Diamond Joe for fifty cents, and the day following Urline wore them about camp, shamelessly, brazenly.

The next time Ruby went to the commissary the clerk asked her why Urline was wearing the beads. Usually the white men in camp paid no attention to the doings of the Negroes, or if they did they never said anything about it.

"My husband sold 'em," Ruby said.

The clerk looked at Ruby through half-squinted eyes. Ruby was not pretty. She was dingy black, with a big mouth and big eyes. Her nose was flat and her body was small and spindly. Her head was cymlin-shaped and her shanky legs stuck into her bare feet much closer to the toes than seemed necessary, leaving grotesque heels sticking out behind. But she was a woman and she was young.

"I got another string, and it's prettier than those," he said.

"I ain't buyin' no mo' beads," Ruby declared.

The clerk took a string of bright beads from a box and held them temptingly before Ruby's eyes. "I don't want you to buy them, gal," he said. "I might just give them to you."

The beads were pretty—prettier than the others, Ruby thought. But she did not like the way the clerk's voice sounded. She looked from the beads to the clerk's face. Then she understood. She did not know what it was, so she could not have explained it to anyone. She never could explain what it was that told her not to step over a fallen tree and upon the back of a cottonmouth moccasin that lay coiled there either, but she had never stepped upon the back of the deadly snakes that

lurked everywhere. She just saw something in the clerk's eyes that told her to get out of that tent as quickly as she could. And she bolted out, knocking over stacks of canned goods and cured meat as she ran.

Back in her tent, cooking for her man, Ruby soon forgot the incident and settled down, behaving herself just like any married woman should, spending her days in procuring and cooking food and gadding about with the women and her nights in feeding her man and watching him sleep. Seldom were a dozen words spoken between her and her husband during any given twenty-four hours. Yaller Jack would come in, hungry and tired. He would eat huge mountains of cabbage and great hunks of side meat and cornbread, and then stretch out on the bunk and sleep like a log until Ruby called him for breakfast.

On Sundays and rainy days there was no work. Ruby enjoyed these days most. She liked to talk to Yaller Jack and to hear him talk. Then, too, old Smokey always took her accordion over to the big forage tent and played, and the rest of the Negroes gathered about and sang. On Sundays they sang nothing but church songs:

Looked down de road and I seed de devil comin'—
I know de Lawd done laid His hands on me.
Snatched off my shoes and I beat de devil runnin'—
I know de Lawd done laid His hands on me.

Ruby led the singing with her shrill voice, and Yaller Jack "caught de tenors" splendidly, shading her high soprano notes into a weird harmony that made an impressive lead for the minor monotones of the others. And Diamond Joe sat back somewhere on a bale of hay and "bassed hit like a bullfrog wid his haid in a crawfish hole." When the songs got too mournful, Urline would shout, and Big Bess would preach and read out of her Bible, just like a regular preacher.

On rainy days they sang all sorts of songs—church songs, just plain songs, and regular bad songs:

When I wored my aprons low
You always hung around my do'.
Love, oh, love, oh, Kelly's love,
You pass my do' and you don't look in.

Of course a married woman had no business singing a song like that. It was a true love song. Big Bess wouldn't even sing "Johnnie and Frankie." Even Urline balked at singing "Soap and Water." But Ruby sang "Kelly's Love" and "Johnnie and Frankie," and when she and Diamond Joe got done singing that "Soap and Water" song there wasn't anything left to sing about.

Yaller Jack knew that the "Soap and Water" song was no song for any married woman to sing and he told Ruby it wasn't—told her right before everybody.

But Ruby didn't care. She and Diamond Joe were singing and old Smokey was playing, and Ruby went right on, sending her voice into a high, quivering tremolo. Old Diamond Joe's mouth flopped open like a channel catfish after a minnow, and he looked right straight at Ruby—with the same kind of look that the commissary clerk had given her.

But Ruby felt devilish that day, and the look did not tell her to run off. She just looked right back at Diamond Joe and made the next note whine at him. She wasn't afraid to sing "Soap and Water" with Diamond Joe, or any other man. "Ashes to ashes, Lawd, and dust to dust, Lawd." The preacher had said it, and she wasn't afraid. She giggled and backed off, facing Yaller Jack:

"Ruby and Diamond was a-singin' a song,
Yaller say, 'Don't, 'cause you know hit's wrong.'
Ruby tole Yaller, 'Ain't dat's a shame,
Cause you calls my singin' such a dirty name.'
'Soap and Water,' I said, 'Soap and Water.'"

That was a pretty good pop-out to sing at your husband, Ruby thought, and she started to giggle again. But she saw Yaller Jack look mean murder at Diamond Joe, and she knew what Yaller Jack meant by that look. And she knew what he meant when he grabbed her wrist and twisted her arm until it nearly popped out at the shoulder.

"Hit's all right, darlin'," she pleaded. "Hit's all right, Yaller. You know I ain't studdin' nobody but you, darlin'."

"I got eyes," Yaller Jack said roughly, and he twisted harder.

"But, darlin'," begged Ruby, "I ain't done nothin'. I

couldn't ef I wanted to. De preacher done said on me, Yaller. De preacher said."

"Said which?" Yaller Jack demanded.

"When us got married," Ruby explained. "De preacher say, 'Ashes to ashes, Lawd, and dust to dust, Lawd.' He said right on me——"

"Foolish," exploded Yaller Jack. "Dat's what dey say on daid fo'ks at de funerals." Lord, Lord, how that stout man could twist your arm!

Ruby looked panicky. She trembled before Yaller Jack's ugly frown. "Didn't de preacher said dat on me, sho' nuff, Yaller?" she pleaded. "He didn't said dat ashes to ashes charm on me when us gits married? Sho' nuff?"

"Co'se he ain't, Baby," Yaller Jack's anger was giving way to pity. "Co'se he ain't. Dat's a charm on de daid. Us ain't got daid when us got married, honey."

Ruby looked inquiringly at Big Bess. She had been married by a preacher.

"Dey says, 'Ashes to ashes, Lawd, and dust to dust, Lawd,' on de daid fo'ks on'y," she confirmed.

Ruby could hardly believe it. But Big Bess ought to know what she was talking about.

"What do hit mean, den, when you says hit on daid fo'ks?" she demanded. She couldn't see any reason in putting a charm on a dead woman.

Big Bess did not know what it meant. It was in the Bible, she explained, and that was all she wanted to know about it. Maybe old Smokey might know, but if anything was in the Bible that was enough for Big Bess to know about it.

"Hit's a charm," Smokey explained, "which keeps off de ha'nts." She waited for that to soak in and continued: "When somebody wants to does you somethin' and you kills 'em well, dey ups and ha'nts you." Everybody knew that, already. "But"—and Smokey paused again—"when somebody else kills 'em or dey just dies, like f'm de yaller janders or a snake bite, well, de ha'nt come right on and tries to do you jest like de person was tryin' to do you befo' he dies. Unless"—she paused once more to emphasize the exception—"unless you says, 'Ashes to ashes, Lawd, and dust to dust, Lawd,' and dat puts a charm on 'em and dey can't ha'nt you. So de fo'ks got in de habit er sayin' de charm on all

daid fo'ks 'cause you don't never know what's goin' on in a daid man's mind befo' he dies."

"But ef'n you kills 'em yo' ownse'f hit don't put no charm on de ha'nt or nobody?" Ruby pressed.

"Naw, 'cause you got de blood on yo' hands and de ha'nt kin smell de blood, I don't keer how much you charms. Hit's on'y for a natchal death like when somebody else kills 'em dat de charm work."

Ruby could not see any sense in that. It sounded foolish, and it robbed her of something. "Ashes to ashes, Lawd——" Ruby did not realize what a protection that charm had been to her until she suddenly found it had been no protection at all. "Ashes to ashes, Lawd, and dust to dust, Lawd"—a magic spell to make a young married woman safe? Humph! Nothing but words that they said on dead folks. "Diamond Joe ain't daid. He's about de livest man in dis camp, dis day and time," she decided. "And yarYaller Jack paid three and a half for dat pair er co'thouse licenses and hired a preacher—jest for nothin'!"

That night when everything got quiet and she could hear that old river witch out in the canebrake pulling at her hair and making her feel mean, she cried and clung to Yaller Jack. "I don't keer ef'n hit ain't nothin' kin git me, Yaller," she begged. "I's skeered and I wants to stay like dis."

Yaller Jack felt sorry for her. "Hit's mighty hot to-night, Baby," he grumbled, "and I hits de levee at daylight. But ef'n you's sho' nuff skeered you kin lay agin me till you goes to sleep."

The next day Ruby hunted out Big Bess and made her read the Bible to her and sing and pray for her.

"Hit ain't no use in gittin' skeered when you's got de Lawd on yo' side," Big Bess consoled. "I got de Lawd on my side, and I ain't skeered."

"Do de Lawd he'p you hold yo' man?" Ruby pleaded.

Big Bess had boundless faith. But she was a woman—and she knew her Bible. "De Lawd," she explained, "ain't doin' nothin' for nobody which ain't doin' dey part. A 'ooman got to do ev'ything she kin befo' de Lawd gonter turn His hands."

They prayed and sang some more, and Ruby went away

feeling more secure in her relationship with her husband. But during the afternoon she got lonesome. It was one thing to know that the Lord was going to help you out, maybe, if you did everything you could to fight the river witch in old Diamond Joe. But it was better to see your own big, hard-working husband out on the levee, making a dollar and a half a day and saving his money. She walked to the edge of the clearing where the men were working and, half concealed behind a willow bush, she watched them. Yaller Jack was driving the team of big mules up and down the embankment, dragging dirt up there and dumping it from the slip and then driving down and loading again. There were a dozen or so other teams just like Yaller Jack's, but he was doing it better than the rest, Ruby felt certain. He had a way of just reaching down and lifting the slip handle so slightly that it looked as if he barely touched it, and the mules would walk right on and turn the slip bottom up. Then he just touched the handle again, and the slip jumped back right side up. It was so easy the way he did it—and all the time, walking along lazily, burying his bare feet to the ankles in the loose black dirt and singing as if he wasn't working at all. Singing about her:

“Workin’ on de levee,
Dollar fo’ bits a day—
Give my Ruby de dollar,
And lays fo’ bits away.”

Doggone it, it was something to have a man like that, even if you didn't have a charm on him! Fine-looking, brown-skinned man, singing about you and working for you! The biggest man on the job, too—except old Diamond Joe.

“Diamond Joe! Humph!” she snorted. “I don't see how come I got to come thinkin' about dat scound'el.”

She looked about for him. He was leaning against the handles of the big swamp plough that went through the dirt and roots and loosened things up so the slips could dig out the dirt. It was a big plough and took four big mules to pull it. But Diamond Joe was stout enough to hold on when it went bucking and jumping and jerking through the roots and under the stumps.

“Doggone old Diamond,” Ruby grinned, “he's a big man

and he's a stout man. He don't need no river witch to git in him. Dat scound'el is a natchal-bawn he-witch his ownse'f."

While Ruby stood there gazing fondly at Diamond Joe, she saw him reach down casually, pull a long cypress root from the ground, and strike with it.

"Snake," someone called, and immediately everyone started gathering around. Ruby joined the circle of men and watched with them while a long cottonmouth moccasin squirmed and writhed in death.

"Blind," offered Yaller Jack, eyeing the snake's head closely.

"Dog days make 'em like dat," Diamond Joe volunteered. "Dog days puts scales on dey eyes. I bet dat sucker was headin' for de river to git him a drink. Whey dey gits dry and mad, dey bites ev'ything dat dey tech. And kill you? Mankind! I bet hit's enough pizen in dat snake's haid right now to kill ev'y mule on de levee, let alone de mens."

"I seed a man git bit by a cottonmouf," commented one of the workers. "He jest bent hisse'f double and moaned once. Den he stretched out, stiff as a poker. Didn't had to put him on no coolin' boa'd. He was cold."

"Hi—you niggers!" It was the Walking Boss calling. "Get back to work. Get them teams started. We can't stop the job just because somebody killed a snake." Levees are built and repaired by the cubic yard of dirt moved.

The workers tore themselves away reluctantly and went to work—up the levee and down again. Diamond did not belong with that circle. He handled the big plough, and when there was no ploughing to be done he rested. When he and Ruby were left alone he looked at her and grinned—the same way he had grinned over in the forage tent.

"What you sayin', Good Lookin'?" he asked.

Ruby knew she should have hollered for Yaller Jack when he looked at her like that. She should have run, too. But she didn't. Maybe the old river witch was in Diamond Joe. Maybe "Ashes to ashes, Lawd" was all a mistake. But what did Ruby care?

"Soap and Water," she giggled.

Diamond looked worriedly toward Yaller Jack, now back at work, fifty yards away. He wasn't afraid of Yaller Jack, but then, there was no use in taking any chances. He picked up

the dead snake and stretched it, belly up, across the top of a stump. A man sleeps sounder when it is raining.

"Mo' rain, mo' rest," he grinned.

Ruby giggled. "You likes a heap er rest, don't you, Diamond?" she asked.

"I likes a heap er rain," said Diamond Joe. "I'm gonter watch out for dis yar snake's mate. Hit'll come along de same route befo' sundown. And I'll hang hit up, too. And den, just watch hit rain to-night."

The words they were saying sounded harmless enough. But both of them knew they were just saying words with their mouths. Ruby's mind was on this big, stout black man. And Diamond's mind was on this skinny, fresh, big-eyed young woman.

"I got my bunk down under dat big cottonwood back er de commissary, Good Lookin'," Diamond Joe said.

Ruby burrowed her big toe into the ground and looked shyly up at him from the corners of her eyes.

"Hit ain't nothin' to me does you got yo' bunk out in de river," she giggled, and walked off. But before she got ten feet away she started singing a pop-out:

"Diamond, Diamond, old black Diamond—
Come on and git me, Diamond Joe."

She went straight to her tent and started supper, putting a double portion of side meat into the cabbage.

"Dat'll make him sleep heavy," she said.

Her supper boiling away, Ruby quit the tent and sprawled flat on the ground under the live oak outside. She lay there for a long time, motionless except to fan away a horse fly or slap at a mosquito, listening to the silent rumbling of the young cane sprouting in the brake and breathing deeply of the alluvial odours that hung heavily on the still, steamy air. When everything got very quiet so that she felt her own veins and arteries throughout her body rising and falling with the rhythmic beat of her heart, she crooned a wordless little chant that sounded strange and weird to her.

"Wonder is dat river witch got in me, too?" she asked.

She sat up and listened. She heard nothing save the mosquitoes whining and an occasional chirp of a bird. There was

no one in camp except the other women and they were sleeping as was usual in the afternoon. A hundred yards or so away the men were working on the levee, but the thick undergrowth screened them from view.

Ruby peered intently toward where she knew Diamond Joe was leaning on the plough handles, and she saw something black moving in the edge of the clearing. It wasn't Diamond Joe, she decided, and she looked again.

"Buzzard," she announced. Then she laughed. "Lookin' to see kin I see ole Diamond and I sees a buzzard!" she laughed again. Buzzards were all right. They did not mean anything, and they were funny, too. Yaller Jack could mock them to a fare you well with his buzzard dance. He just laid his hat on the ground for the carcass and danced around it charily, like the king buzzard sampling the dinner for the rest of the flock.

"I looks to see ole Diamond," Ruby repeated, giggling to herself, "and I see de king buzzard gittin' after his rain snake!"

That was it! The buzzard was after Diamond's rain snake. That was something else again, and Ruby did not laugh.

"When somethin' monkeys wid a sign," she recalled, "hit's de worst kind er luck." Granny Lou had taught her that. And yet, Granny Lou had taught her that a buzzard was neither good luck nor bad luck. What about that? It was too intricate for Ruby's brain.

"I'm gonter see kin I git me a sign on hit," she decided, and she closed her eyes and held her breath.

Almost as soon as she did this, a robin started singing merrily from a limb in the cottonwood, down back of the commissary—singing in the tree right over Diamond Joe's bed! Ruby grinned triumphantly.

"Doggone!" she exclaimed. "Listen at 'at sassy scound'el. Jest like a answer to my prayer!" She knew a buzzard could monkey around all the signs that he wanted to. But the robin's song was brief. A jay bird heard him, the same as Ruby, and the jay bird went straight after that robin.

Ruby witnessed the brief flutter of leaves and she saw the robin flying for its life straight toward the river. Then she heard the dry, cackling chatter of the victorious jay bird. Instinctively she dropped to her knees and began to chant over and over in a fervent monotone:

"Jay bird, jay bird, hang yo' haid,
Flyin' on to hell wid a grain of sand."

That jay bird had sung over a bed, which meant Death was going to sleep in that bed! Death! That's what it meant. Granny Lou had said it. "When a jay bird sing over a bed," Granny Lou had told her time and again, "dat de sign Death gonter sleep in dat bed." That was what Granny Lou had said. But death for whom? Granny Lou hadn't said.

Ruby was scared. "Lawd, I wish Granny Lou was here right now, Lawd," she wailed. "What do hit mean, Granny Lou? Lawd, what do hit mean, Lawd?"

Desperately she closed her eyes and held her breath for another sign. But none came. She tried to reason it out in her mind, but it just got jumbled up and made her feel helpless and scared. She wished the Lord would help her, or Granny Lou, or anybody. Maybe Smokey would help her. She knew some of the signs.

Ruby dragged Smokey out of the bunk and bared her troubled soul to the older woman. Smokey closed her eyes and groaned mysteriously.

"Hit's yo' charm workin'," she explained. "Hit work slow and hard. But I don't keer what Big Bess say, ev' since dat preacher say 'Ashes to ashes, Lawd' on you, you been under a spell."

"But dat de daid charm," protested Ruby. "Yaller and Bess both say so. And Yaller say de preacher ain't said hit."

"Co'se hit's a daid charm," Smokey agreed, "and I don't keer ef'n de preacher didn't said hit, yo' gran'mammy said hit on you, didn't she? Well, hit jest means dat any man which come co'tin' at you besides yo' husband is gonter run into dat spell and he gonter die. Dat's all."

It was very clear to Ruby now. Diamond Joe had flouted that charm, and that was why the jay bird sang over his bed. Diamond Joe would die. Ruby was glad, too, because as long as Diamond Joe was alive he would witch her, and Yaller Jack never would believe anything about that charm.

"But on de yuther hand," continued Smokey sonorously, "Diamond sho' got de river witch in him, and he ain't gonter jest die by hisse'f."

Ruby's heart sank like a lump of lead. Then as suddenly it rose, and her eyes blazed.

"I got a mighty sharp razor," she said.

"And git Diamond's blood on yo' hands?" suggested Smokey. "He'll ha'nt you to de grave."

"Ha'nts is better'n havin' river witches stealin' you f'm yo' man," Ruby argued stubbornly.

"Worser," declared Smokey. "Besides, hit ain't yo' place to go cuttin' up ev'y man which makes eyes at you, is hit? Ain't you got a husband? Yaller Jack ain't lame."

Without another word Smokey dragged her bulky body back into the bunk and wrapped the mosquito netting around her head. Ruby knew Smokey had said everything she was going to say, so she went back to her tent, resigned to tell Yaller Jack and let him kill Diamond Joe.

"But what about Yaller Jack?" The question popped out of her head just like a devil song. "Wouldn't Diamond Joe ha'nt him, too? And maybe de white fo'ks puts him in jail and maybe hang him." White folks did that sometimes, when a man got to killing another man. It had all been so simple, and then suddenly it got all balled up again. Ruby could not straighten it out in her mind, so she closed her eyes and held her breath for a sign. The first thing she heard was Big Bess stirring around in her tent just below hers and Yaller Jack's. That wasn't the sign of anything. So she tried again. Then Big Bess started singing:

"I'm gonter make my troubles easy,
On my knees.
I'm gonter make my troubles easy,
On my knees.
I'm gonter git down on my knees,
I'm gonter say, 'Lawd, he'p me please.'
I'm gonter make my troubles easy,
On my knees."

That was it! The Lord would help her. But before the Lord helped her, Ruby would have to do everything she could for herself. It was so simple again. Ruby grinned.

"I wonder is dat yuther moccasin come crawlin' along, yit?" she said. She went to the forage tent and got a big grain sack.

When Yaller Jack came in from work that night Ruby sat

by his side proudly and ate the greasy, reddish-brown cabbage with him, dipping her hunk of fried hoecake into the "pot-licker" just as he did.

"You better eat dat fat meat," she said, "so's you kin sleep heavy and keep yo' strenk."

Yaller Jack chewed a while and then swallowed.

"Yeah," he said, "I better had."

That was all the conversation they had during the meal. They had eaten many meals on less.

As soon as they finished eating Yaller Jack crawled across the bunk. Before Ruby was through clearing the supper remains, he was sound asleep. As soon as she finished her brief dish washing and other chores she crawled into the bunk and lay down by his side. But she did not sleep. She just lay there and listened.

She heard Big Bess and her man crawl into bed. Then Urline and Yancey in the next tent down turned in and fussed for half an hour. Finally they hushed and everything got quiet. A bullfrog away back in the canebrake croaked voluminously and was silenced by the screech of a hawk. Presently another frog croaked more timidly. Another answered, and another and another took up the song. Soon the whole canebrake echoed with their throaty music. The night was young. Ruby waited.

Then, suddenly, as if some sylvan maestro had lowered his baton, the jungle symphony ceased. A soft gust of wind, heavy laden with pungent odours from the canebrake, pushed gently against the side of the tent and passed on to the river. Ruby wiped the perspiration from her face with the palm of her hand, and Yaller Jack stopped snoring long enough to open and close his mouth and swallow. Quiet again.

The moon climbed out of the river and over the levee. A katydid tried one squeaky, shrill note. A cricket answered, and another katydid tuned up. Then suddenly the whole place became alive with the wild, screechy fiddling of the insects, which lasted for half an hour.

When the katydids and crickets stopped, Ruby slipped noiselessly from the bunk and out of the tent. The moon was shining straight down through the treetops. It was not very light under the trees, but it was light enough. She walked straight to the big live oak and from its low fork she gingerly

picked up a grain sack, holding it well away from her body as she carried it.

As she made her way through camp to Diamond Joe's bunk she tried to hum Big Bess's song:

"I'm gonter say, 'Lawd, he'p me please.'"

But the words got mixed up and it didn't go so well. Then she changed it about and it went just like a pop-out;

"De Lawd say, 'Ruby, he'p me, please.'
I'm gonter keep my skillet greasy,
Show's yow bawn."

It may be wrong to sing pop-outs at the Lord, Ruby figured. But it just popped out.

"I's doin' my part," she reasoned, "and ef'n I does enough, well, den, de Lawd don't has to he'p me 'less He wants to. Dat's His business and hit ain't none er mine. I's doin' my part—all I kin."

"Dat you, sweetenin'?" Diamond Joe had been stretched out on his bunk waiting, and when Ruby approached, he sat up. "I thought you never was gonter git yar, gal."

Ruby could barely make him out against the dark shadow. She said nothing.

"Got yo' bundle wid you, too," he accused. "Gal, I ain't gonter run off with you. Come yar bringin' dat bundle er clothes." You had to be mannish with a gal like Ruby to make her love you.

Ruby edged up closer. "Hit ain't no clothes in dis bundle," she said.

"What is in hit? Give it yar!" Diamond Joe snatched the sack from Ruby's hand roughly, pulled the end of a string that loosed the slip knot, and turned the sack upside down greedily. The mate to the cottonmouth moccasin that he had killed that afternoon fell squirming and writhing into his lap.

Ruby turned without a word and went racing to her tent.

"I done ev'ything I could do," she said, crawling into her bunk.

With elbows resting on her knees and her chin buried in her cupped hands, Ruby sat there in her bunk, listening and waiting. Her straining ears caught a faint groan, she imagined, coming from the cottonwood tree. "He jest doubled up and

moaned once," the man had said that afternoon in describing a cottonmouth's victim.

Ruby waited and listened. Yaller Jack opened and closed his mouth and swallowed. A belated tree frog called timidly, and its mate answered from a near-by tree. Quiet again.

Then, from away back in the canebrake, came the mournful wail of a screech owl. Ruby shifted to a kneeling position, as if in prayer.

"Ashes to ashes, Lawd," she mumbled ceremoniously, "and dust to dust, Lawd." And with a fatigued yawn she stretched out on her side of the bunk and slept like a tired child.